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The Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth

Recommendations for the support of Gay / Straight Alliances in Massachusetts

Recommendations To:

The Governor and Lt. Governor

Principals and Superintendents

Parents

High Schools

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September 26, 1996

State House, Room 111, Boston, MA 02133
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I: Introduction

Formation and History of the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth

Governor William F. Weld signed an executive order on February 10, 1992 creating the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, the first of its kind in the nation. The Governor then signed into law on December 10, 1993 legislation prohibiting discrimination against any student in a public school based on sexual orientation. This law has come to be known as the Massachusetts Gay and Lesbian Student Rights Law. Governor Weld and Lieutenant Governor A. Paul Cellucci acted in response to the epidemic of suicide by gay and lesbian youth as revealed in a 1989 Federal report on youth suicide. This report stated that between 1950 and 1980, the suicide rate for youths aged 15 through 24 rose 170% as opposed to only 20% among the total population. Gay and lesbian youths accounted for approximately 30% of those youth suicides.

The Commission's mandate is the prevention of gay and lesbian youth suicide, violence prevention and creating school environments where gay and lesbian students can feel safe and where harassment is not tolerated. The Commission is empowered to make recommendations to the Governor and to state and private agencies about the creation of programs and policies on behalf of gay and lesbian students in Massachusetts. As expressed by the Governor in the preamble to the executive order, abolishing prejudice and discrimination against gay and lesbian youth is the goal and charge of the Commission.

The Massachusetts Gay and Lesbian Student Rights Law:

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 76, Section 5:

No person shall be excluded form or discriminated against in admission to a public school of any town, or in obtaining the advantages, privileges, and courses of study of such public school on account of race, color, sex, national origin or ***sexual orientation****.*

II: Recommendations for the support of Gay/ Straight Alliances in Massachusetts

The Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth Recommends:

1) that the Governor and State Legislature increase funding in order that every High School in Massachusetts can receive a grant to help them form a Gay /Straight Alliance.

•Massachusetts is in its fourth year of funding for the safe schools program for gay and lesbian students, a joint project of the Department of Education and the Governor's Commission.

• Grant funding for GSA's currently stands at $167,000 and can only reach 75-90 schools statewide.

•**Action Item**: Doubling the present budget will reach every school in the Commonwealth with the funding necessary to start their own local Gay /Straight Alliance and begin to implement safe schools initiatives in their towns.

2) that High School Principals and Superintendents ensure that school handbooks, disciplinary codes and anti-discrimination policies include student sexual orientation in accordance with Massachusetts Law, Chapter 76, section 5.

• A 1984 survey of 2,074 gay adults conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force found that 45% of the males and 20% of the females reported to have experienced verbal or physical assaults in secondary school because they were perceived to be gay or lesbian.

• School administrators have the power to change this reality for the next generation of gay and lesbian adults.

• Commissioner Antonucci in 1993 called on all school administrations to, " amend existing anti-harassment policies to include prohibiting violence, harassment and verbal abuse directed against gay and lesbian students and those perceived to be gay or lesbian."

•**Action Item**: The Governor's Commission will be conducting a survey of every High School in the state to ensure that they are in compliance with this law.

3) that parents in Massachusetts come out in support of Gay / Straight Alliances in their communities and assist in the formation of new Gay /Straight Alliances.

• Parents have a special role to play as adult community members and taxpayers. You can alert your local school systems to the need for every school in the Commonwealth to be a safe environment where every student can learn free from fear and harassment.

• A 1989 report from the HHS, "Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide" stated that 26% of young gays and lesbians are forced to leave home because of conflicts over their sexual orientation.

•**Action Item**: The Governor's Commission calls on parents and families of gay and lesbian students to present positive models for other adult community members so as to create a supportive environment outside of school.

4) that every High School in Massachusetts which does not have a Gay / Straight Alliance form one.

•Presently 25% of Massachusetts' High Schools have Gay / Straight Alliances.

•In 1992 only 1 or 2 High Schools had GSA's, in 1996 75 of the state's 300 High Schools have GSA's.

•Testimony from students at Commission hearings and events point to GSA's as being the single most important factor in preventing student dropout and youth suicide.

•**Action Item:** The Governor's Commission will conduct student leadership trainings and outreach statewide to help form new GSA's.

It has been through the work of the Gay /Straight Alliances that the most significant changes statewide have taken place:

--Students from Brookline High School were instrumental in lobbying for the passage of the Gay and Lesbian Student Rights Law in 1993.

--Mahar Regional Schools now flies their rainbow diversity flag under the American flag on their school flagpole.

--Arlington High School rallied for a yearly gay and lesbian awareness day at their school.

--Greater Lawrence Vocational Tech. held workshops for faculty, staff and their community on ending homophobia.

--Lowell High School participated in the Teen Theater workshop on the topic of sexual orientation.

--Plymouth High School created a group called Diversity Works to end homophobia in their schools.

-- Bourne Public Schools implemented discussions and presentations in their health classes around the issue of sexual orientation.

--Canton High School provided faculty in-service programs.

--Dighton Rehoboth Regional High School created an awareness campaign school wide about the issue of sexual orientation.

--Drury High School hosted a regional social event for neighboring towns to celebrate and discuss issues of sexual orientation.

--Framingham High School established a GSA and then hosted evening information and discussion sessions for parents and community members.

These are just a few examples of the positive work that schools and students across the state have done to make their schools safe for gay, lesbian and bisexual students. We envision a future in which every school in the Commonwealth and every student in the Commonwealth can study, learn and grow in a safe environment free from harassment and discrimination whatever their sexual orientation.